

The Islamism Debate

**edited by
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The Mismeasure of Political Islam

Martin Kramer

Perhaps no development of the last decade of the twentieth century has caused as much confusion in the West as the emergence of political Islam. Just what does it portend? Is it against modernity, or is it an effect of modernity? Is it against nationalism, or is it a form of nationalism? Is it a striving for freedom, or a revolt against freedom?

One would think that these are difficult questions to answer, and that they would inspire deep debates. Yet over the past few years, a surprisingly broad consensus has emerged within academe about the way political Islam should be measured. This consensus has begun to spread into parts of government as well, especially in the U.S. and Europe. A paradigm has been built, and its builders claim that its reliability and validity are beyond question.

This now-dominant paradigm runs as follows. The Arab Middle East and North Africa are stirring. The peoples in these lands are still under varieties of authoritarian or despotic rule. But they are moved by the same universal yearning for democracy which transformed Eastern Europe and Latin America. True, there are no movements we would easily recognize as democracy movements. But for historical and cultural reasons, this universal yearning has taken the form of Islamist protest movements. If these do not look like democracy movements, that is only a consequence of our own age-old bias against Islam. When the veil of prejudice is lifted, one will see Islamist movements for what they are: the functional equivalents of democratic reform movements.

True, on the edges of these movements are groups that are atavistic and authoritarian. Some of their members are prone to violence. These are the "extremists." But the mainstream movements are essentially open, pluralistic, and nonviolent, led by "moderates" or "reformists." These "moderates" can be strengthened if they are made partners in the political process, and an initial step must be dialogue. But ultimately the most

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effective way to domesticate the Islamists is to permit them to share or possess power. There is no threat here unless the West creates it, by supporting acts of state repression that would deny Islamists access to participation or power.

There are several hidden assumptions beneath this paradigm:

- First, that the yearning for democracy is today universal, and stands behind the mass Islamist movements.
- Second, that there are "extremists" and "moderates" in Islamist movements, and that they can be reliably identified, classified, and separated, both for analytical and policy purposes.
- Third, that power has a moderating effect upon those who share or exercise it, and would have such an effect upon Islamists as well.
- Fourth, that because Islamism represents the populist will, its triumph is inevitable.

These assumptions form the four legs of the paradigmatic table. Take one out, and the paradigm collapses. Do any of these legs wobble? Perhaps all four do.

Universal Democrats

The first assumption holds that the yearning for democracy is today universal, and stands behind the mainstream Islamist movements.

Looking at the dismal state of government across the expanse of Islam, many observers conclude that all broad-based opposition can have only one purpose: democratic reform. One political scientist assures us that "the Islamist movements are basically social reform movements,"¹ another expert tells us these are "political reform movements."² Still another political scientist, a bit more cautious, tells a congressional committee that "whatever the ultimate intent of Islamist movements, their current function is a liberalizing one."³ The dominant analogy is to the parties of "reform" in the former Soviet bloc. This is the age of democracy triumphant. It is a free good desired by everyone.

But is it? The other powerful mobilizing force unleashed by the break-up of the Soviet bloc has been the dormant creature called nationalism. In places like the former Yugoslavia, a nationalist surge brought genocide back to Europe. Elsewhere, especially in the former Soviet Union where the democratic tradition is weak, the forces of nationalism are rallying. The first priority of these movements is authenticity, and their position vis-à-vis pluralism, both social and political, is ambivalent at best. In the past few years, political scientists have scrambled to cobble together some understanding of why nationalism returns.

Has it occurred to the paradigm builders that the return of nationalism might provide a more telling analogy for Islamist movements? It is generally agreed that Islamism arose from the failure of Arab (and Iranian and Turkish) nationalism. Not only is this obvious; one might go further: Islamism represents a remake of nationalism as Islamic ideology. Nationalism, leavened by religion, thus becomes a hyper-nationalism. Said Arjomand, sociologist of Iran's revolution, has looked closely at this possibility, and locates the closest analogy to today's Islamist movements in the Rumanian Iron Guards, who combined religious fervor with nationalist chauvinism.⁴

If mainstream Islamist discourse on democracy, minorities, foreigners, women, and cosmopolitan intellectuals, sounds ominously familiar, it is because identical words emanate from the nationalist right in Europe. By any reading, this discourse evokes not Havel and Walesa, but Le Pen and Zhirinovsky. Listen to Hasan al-Turabi of the Sudan, the Sorbonne-schooled ideologue of Islamism: "You talk about freedom, so that the people can express its will. Profess freedom without national liberation and the imperialist will intervene and falsify your will. Elections will express *his* will, the political party will be *his* agent, the newspaper will be *his* mouthpiece."⁵ This is a classic nationalist argument, with a slight fascist overtone that has become the stock-in-trade of the Sudanese oracle.

But Turabi puts it precisely: Islamist movements are first of all about national liberation, not individual liberties; they are about power before politics; their populism is a form of mass mobilization, not participation. It is not the yearning for democracy that drives these movements. It is the yearning for authenticity, by people who are aggrieved and angry, and vulnerable to Islamist promises of power and revenge. There is a debate among Islamists about democracy, and it is useful to follow it. But it is a

circular debate over whether democracy is or is not authentically Islamic. By Islamist consensus, however, democracy is not a value in its own right; and the very fact that a democratic outcome is debated, and not assumed, is the sign of a profound ambivalence.

The fact that some Islamist movements are mass movements is not, ipso facto, a democratic or liberal credential. To call them "liberalizing" because they oppose illiberal regimes assumes a great deal. Is it possible that any people would prefer authenticity to democracy? It is more than possible: it has happened repeatedly across Europe, Asia, and Africa. This is the lesson of nationalism's temptation, perhaps the costliest learned in this century. There are of course people in the Middle East and North Africa who do yearn for democracy. Not surprisingly, they include many of Islamism's most vocal critics—and many of its victims.

"Extremists" and "Moderates"

The second assumption holds that there are "extremists" and "moderates" in Islamist movements, who can be reliably identified, classified, and separated.

Obviously there must be differences among Islamists. A scholar has repeatedly urged that the U.S. government "distinguish between Islamic movements that are a threat and those that represent legitimate indigenous attempts to reform and redirect their societies."⁶ This seems an eminently reasonable objective on paper, but in practice it means going out, measuring each movement, and classifying it. What instrument of measurement do we use, and what do we measure?

One might immediately say, why not do content analysis of what Islamists say? These are blueprints; perhaps we should read them? But the paradigm builders resist this, especially when those texts threaten violence. One political scientist warns that knowing "who the Islamist groups are and what they are doing" is impossible if the West "is preoccupied with content analysis of the Islamists' frequently contradictory statements."⁷ Content analysis is denounced as "new Orientalism," a preoccupation with texts that have nothing to do with what Islamists are truly about. Whatever violence the Islamists deploy in speech or print, this must not be allowed to disqualify them from potential classification as "mod-

erates." One must go out and watch them. And it must be admitted that the paradigm builders can never be accused of misreading political Islam; to misread, one must first read, and this they adamantly refuse to do.

But when one begins to watch "what [the Islamists] are doing," other paradigm builders proclaim that this is no reliable guide either, especially when it is violence that is on display. A political scientist has explained to a U.S. congressional committee his own system of classification, which employs the acronym "NINA"—"Nonviolent Islamists in North Africa." These are defined as "moderate" advocates of the "non-violent transfer of political power." Now as it turns out, Islamists do not have to *practice* non-violence to qualify for "NINA" status. Even when they "degenerate" into violence, determines this political scientist, violence "does not constitute a structural component of either their strategic thinking or tactical actions."⁸ And so they remain "non-violent" "moderates" however many bombs they set off and intellectuals they kill—since they don't *tell* us explicitly why they are doing it. To know their minds, we are sent running back to the texts, looking for thought structures—like "new Orientalists."

In the end, the paradigm builders are profoundly indifferent to what Islamists say or do. To know the paradigm itself is to know what the Islamists are, and what they must become. It is a privileged tool of divination, allowing only its masters to separate the real "extremists" from the real "moderates." Not surprisingly, given this disdain for what normally constitutes evidence, many believers in the paradigm are prepared to declare all the major Islamist movements and their offshoots to be essentially or potentially "moderate," even when they say violence and make violence. The paradigm builders, having promised to make useful distinctions, end up making none whatsoever.

If there is anything more simplistic than lumping Islamists together, it has been the attempt to divide them into the neat categories of "reformist" and "extremist." William Zartman has pointed to "the usual division of Islamic parties into a moderate, usually visible leadership and a radical militant wing, often underground."⁹ If this is the usual division, then how does one classify an Islamic movement which is simultaneously a political group, a militia, and an amalgam of terror cells? How does one classify a formation which seeks recognition as a political party even as

it sets off car bombs in public streets? The murky combination of political party, armed militia, and terror cell is hardly the usual constitution of a "reform" movement, and is virtually impossible to classify along simple lines.

The U.S. has tried to draw these distinctions, with predictable results: America's past Islamist partners in dialogue are today imprisoned in the U.S. for terrorism, listed as terrorists by the State Department, or virtually banned from entry as undesirables. The search for the "moderates," who exist in theory, continues; U.S. diplomats meet with Islamists in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey. But can these diplomats reliably separate, classify, and categorize the Islamists on their beats? Leaving the question of diplomatic competence aside, the task is an impossible one, because these categories are paradigmatic ideal types, not existing realities.

"Power Moderates"

The third assumption holds that power has a moderating effect upon those who share or exercise it. This is probably the most cherished axiom in the paradigm, since it promises that even "extremists" can be redeemed and rehabilitated. Even if it is allowed that Islamist movements are not yet movements of "reform," perhaps they themselves can be reformed?

That will only happen, it is argued, if the Islamists are allowed to compete openly for power. Here is an intelligence analyst-turned-political scientist: "Democracy is probably the best road by which to seek the moderation of radically minded Islamist parties. Islamists are forced toward greater moderation and acceptance of democratic processes when they are required to compete in open elections."¹⁰ And after elections, writes this same analyst, "Islamists will inevitably be forced to compromise with political reality as they move into positions of authority within parliaments and have to deal with those they do not agree with."¹¹

The logical extension of this argument is that absolute power "moderates" absolutely—that if you really want "moderate" Islamists, you should not only wish them to share power, but to have it in spades. And indeed, one journalist has even argued that the U.S. "must not only allow but actively encourage Islamists to come to power by democratic

means and experiment with ways that blend political pluralism and Islam."¹²

There are at least two obvious problems with this assumption: the two extant examples of Islamism in power, Iran and Sudan. The results of these two "experiments" fill the reports of human rights organizations and terrorism monitoring agencies, and pose what might seem an insurmountable problem for the formula that "power moderates." And so the paradigm builders must explain Iran and Sudan—or, more precisely, explain them away.

This has been done in different ways, but the most interesting approach was taken by a political scientist before a congressional committee:

Since the only Islamist Governments in power today obtained their position by coup [i.e., Sudan] or revolution [i.e., Iran], we do not, in fact, have a precedent from which to predict the behavior of popularly elected Islamist Governments. We do know that no revolution or military coup has produced democratic government; what we do not know is whether popularly elected Islamists will be willing or able to sustain democracy.¹³

In other words, Iran and Sudan are not valid results for the experiment at hand, because the Islamists were somehow ruined by the way they acquired power. The argument here is that power is exercised in the way it is acquired, and not in the way it is conceived.

Can this be anything but an article of blind faith? The exceptions are as large as modern history. American democracy came to power through insurrection and revolution. Nazi dictatorship took power through the ballot. (Lord Bullock, Hitler's biographer, described the Nazi case as one of "revolution after power.") When the question is whether power will be used or abused, ideas about power have been better predictors than the way in which it has been acquired. In this respect, Iran and Sudan are arguably exemplary of Islamism in power. One is Sunni, the other is Shiite; one is African and Arab, the other is Asian and Persian; one is resource-poor, one is resource-rich; and yet the results are more or less the same.

Indeed, wherever there are faint signs of Islamist "moderation," it would seem to correlate with greater distance from power. If one were to name the three leading Islamist leaders and thinkers today, one would

probably settle on three men: Rashid al-Ghannushi of Tunisia, Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah of Lebanon's Hizbullah, and Hasan al-Turabi of Sudan. Each also stands in a different relationship to power. Ghannushi is in exile, as distant from power as he can be. Fadlallah is the leader of a movement in Lebanon which is a functioning political party, perhaps somewhere on the road to power. Turabi is in power.

If they are compared, say, on the crucial issue of political pluralism, there are significant variations in their positions. But the correlation is the *opposite* of that posited by the paradigm. Ghannushi, who is the furthest from power, at least professes acceptance of full multiparty democracy. Fadlallah, who stands in an intermediate position, advocates a strictly Islamic multiparty system—limited to Islamic parties alone. Turabi calls any party system divisive; he advocates a no-party system, governed almost secretly in the name of Islam, with the unfortunate results now evident in Sudan.

In short, power, rather than "moderate," would seem to lead Islamists to make ever more elaborate rationales for denying it to others. A far more sustainable assumption would be this: Islamists, who are rational people, "moderate" when they face overwhelming counter-power. But the more power they themselves possess, the more faithfully they revert to their core agenda, dominated by elements most in the West would regard as "extreme."

All the evidence is that power does not "moderate." Weakness "moderates." Islamists have been "tamed," coopted into political systems, only when it has been absolutely clear to them that the rules preclude them from acquiring a monopoly of power. That is why co-optation has worked in monarchies like Jordan and Kuwait, and in Turkey and Syrian-run Lebanon—and why it has been a formula for deepening conflict elsewhere.

Inevitable Islamism

The fourth and last assumption holds that because Islamism represents the populist will, its triumph is inevitable. After the outbreak of the Algerian civil war, many experts argued that the triumph of Islamic movements in the Arab world could not be prevented. The Arab expanse, they

said, was like Eastern Europe: a set of dominoes, set to fall before Islamic movements. Algeria would go first—its fall to the Islamists was predicted with confidence. (Six months after the Algerian coup, a leading journalist wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that it was “in many ways like the abortive Moscow putsch in 1991; although the process may take longer, it will fail for similar reasons.”)¹⁴

Yet eighteen years after Iran’s revolution, and five years after the war began in Algeria, there has been no second Islamic revolution. Despite the violence, the regimes are still in place. The men who have ruled the Middle East and North Africa for a generation still rule it today. Algeria is still a place of violent confrontation, but the regime has held its ground, and even held presidential elections that demonstrated impressive support for its president—despite an Islamist boycott of elections. More recently, an overwhelming majority of Algerian voters approved a new constitution excluding Islamists from power.

What is true about Algeria is even more true about Egypt. Four years ago, there were experts who warned that Egypt could go Islamist; terrorism replaced tourism. Today the most violent Islamists have been pushed back into the most remote part of Egypt. Many languish in prison; the Muslim Brothers are crying foul, but also crying uncle; and the tourists are coming back. In other places in the Arab world, there are manifestations of Islamist opposition and violence, but nowhere are they regime-threatening.

Where did so many of the experts go wrong? Above all, they underestimated the power of the state. The lesson of the Iranian revolution was not that Islamic movements were all-powerful. It was that rulers could fall if they showed weakness. The Shah, despite his omnipotent image, had become a weak ruler. He had been diminished by his cancer, he thought America had abandoned him.

But this did not mean other rulers would show the same weakness, or repeat the Shah’s mistakes. And they have not. They have understood that the preservation of their power is tantamount to their physical survival. Faced with Islamist opposition, they have fought back. They have used their intelligence apparatus and security forces, their courts and their prisons. It has not been done in accord with Western notions of human rights or democracy. But the sum of it is that every Arab ruler threatened by an Islamist opposition has found a way to contain it or confront it—

from Syria's Hafiz Asad to Iraq's Saddam Husayn, from Tunisia's Ben Ali to Egypt's Husni Mubarak. The newest addition to this club is Yasir Arafat, elected leader of the Palestinian Authority.

Repression is working. It is a tired academic sawhorse that repression only strengthens its victims. Islamic history is strewn with dissident groups and revolutionary sects that were repressed out of existence. In the Arab Middle East, the state is still stronger than society, civil or otherwise. This is why there are no revolutions—and also why there is no democracy. Those Islamists who understand the state's abiding strength, who now bend in the wind, are likely to survive to fight another day. The others seem bound to be extinguished.

Nor should one underestimate the impact of the mistakes and weaknesses of the Islamists themselves. For an Islamist movement to make a bid for power, Islamists need secular allies—others who are not Islamists, but who are prepared to join them against the rulers. Here lies one of the fundamental flaws of the Islamists. They cannot tolerate those who differ with them, certainly not long enough to obtain power. Impatient for that power, they begin to purge society even before they rule, with disastrous results for themselves.

This occurred in Algeria, where Islamists embarked on a campaign of killing intellectuals, blowing up journalists, and slitting the throats of unveiled women. Whole segments of society learned to fear the Islamists more than the regime. If the government has an upper hand today, this is largely because of the egregious mistakes of the Islamists in reading the response of the Algerian people. The same occurred also in Egypt, where the Islamist targeting of tourism undermined the millions of individual Egyptian households that depend on tourism for their livelihoods. It was broader Egyptian society that was harmed by the Islamist violence—and it was broader Egyptian society that turned against the Islamists.

"All movements go too far," said Bertrand Russel. The Islamists went too far, and now are paying for it dearly. Not only did the West's experts prophesy falsely when they predicted an Islamist triumph. They failed to anticipate the deep crisis which now afflicts the Islamists, and which in some countries could augur their demise.

The Collapse of a Paradigm

In sum, the dominant paradigm has failed. It has mistaken virulent forms of hyper-nationalism for social and political reformism. It has misleadingly classified Islamist movements into "moderate" and "extreme" categories that do not exist. It has made hopelessly naive assumption about the effect of power on Islamist behavior. And it has postulated the inevitable triumph of a movement which is now in the throes of a crisis. Why is there so much support for a paradigm which so utterly fails to describe or predict?

The most important factor is the predispositions of contemporary academe. For most academic commentators on things Islamic, 1978 is a watershed—not because a stern Shiite cleric inspired a revolution, but because a stern Columbia literature professor published a book. Edward Said's *Orientalism* persuaded them that their only legitimate role was to apologize and sympathize. Today it is difficult to find a scholarly discourse more self-conscious than the scholarly discourse on political Islam. Indeed, many practitioners have only one eye on the movements they purport to study. The other eye is fixed squarely on disciplinary dogma, which holds that any feverish act done in the name of Islam should be shown a respectful deference—repentance for historic wrongs done by the West against Muslims. This has been a major obstacle not only to understanding, but to open debate itself.

The area experts have been joined by well-intentioned political scientists, schooled in the optimism of American liberalism, who are certain everyone really wants to enjoy what the West enjoys, in the way the West enjoys it. In a paradoxical way, theirs is the ultimate ethnocentrism. It posits universal values and universal motives, which in the end turn out to be precisely our own. But the world is an infinitely varied place, and many of its people are struggling with a sense of grievance and desire for revenge difficult for others to imagine. This is nowhere more true than in the case of political Islam.

The dominant paradigm, then, is defective, and those who continue to employ it will continue to mismeasure political Islam, with more and more damaging results. If the paradigm is broken, what is to be done? Clearly, there is a need for an alternative paradigm. It should realistically see political Islam as part of the global resurgence of nationalism. It should

throw out meaningless, static categories, and instead try to map the interconnections between the volatile components of political Islam. It should face head-on the serious complications that arise when political Islam achieves political power. And it should take into account the strength of the state, and the evident tendency of Islamists to alienate potential allies. Far fewer minds are at work on this alternative paradigm, but its power is not in numbers, and it has already opened space for debate.

And political Islam must continue to be debated. One hears a great deal about the need for dialogue. But in the present climate, there seems to be a far greater need for vigorous debate. A few years back, a political scientist, in an appearance before a committee of congress, urged that the U.S. "find ways of engaging Islamist politicians in dialogue that will emphasize our commonalities, not our differences."¹⁵ There could be no greater guarantee of misunderstanding. The differences are real, and they will not vanish simply because they are skirted. But if they are debated openly in the West, then this is sure to give courage to others, in the Middle East and North Africa. Such debate may even fan the embers of a more far-reaching transformation in Islam itself.

NOTES

1. Augustus Richard Norton, "Breaking through the Wall of Fear in the Arab World," *Current History* (January 1992): 41.
2. John Esposito quoted in *Islam and Democracy: Religion, Politics, and Power in the Middle East*, ed. Timothy D. Sisk (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 1992), 12-13.
3. Statement by Michael C. Hudson, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, *Promoting Pluralism and Democracy in the Middle East*, 102d Congress, 2d sess., 11 August 1992, 36.
4. Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 209.
5. Speech by Turabi to the Popular Arab-Islamic Conference, *Al-Islam wa-Filastin* (Nicosia), May-June 1991.
6. John Esposito quoted in *Islam and Democracy*, 12-13.
7. Ghassan Salamé, "Islam and the West," *Foreign Policy*, no. 90 (Spring 1993): 32.

8. Statement by John Entelis, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, *Recent Developments in North Africa*, 103d Congress, 2d sess., 28 September 1994.
9. I. William Zartman, "Democracy and Islam: The Cultural Dialectic," in *Political Islam*, eds. Charles E. Butterworth and I. William Zartman (= *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, no. 524 [November 1992]): 189. This was precisely Zartman's view of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, whose "moderates" were "simply front-men" for a "militant leadership." See interview with Zartman, *Middle East Affairs* (Spring-Summer 1993): 59.
10. Graham Fuller, *Islamic Fundamentalism in the Northern Tier Countries: An Integrative View* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 1991), xii, 21.
11. Graham Fuller, "A Phased Introduction of Islamists," in *Democracy in the Middle East*, 25.
12. Robin Wright, "U.S. Needs Foreign Policy on Islam," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 1993.
13. Testimony by Lisa Anderson, in House Committee, *Promoting Pluralism*, 5.
14. Robin Wright, "Islam, Democracy and the West," *Foreign Affairs* 71, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 136.
15. Hearing statement by Michael C. Hudson, in House Committee, *Promoting Pluralism*, 37-38.